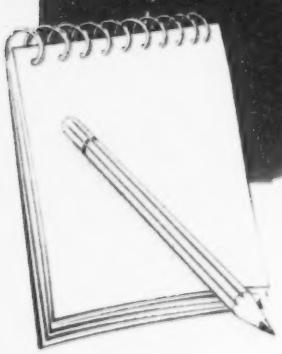
Principals' Toolkit to support THE Learning TEAM



A handbook for parents of children with special needs

Alberta
LEARNING
Learning and Teaching Resources Branch
Special Programs Branch

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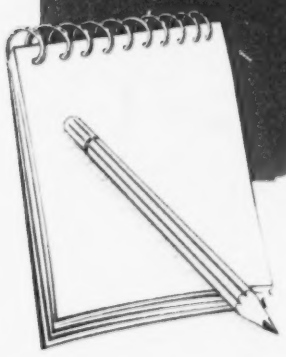
Principals' Toolkit to support THE Learning TEAM



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The primary intended audience for this document is:

Administrators	✓
Counsellors	
General Audience	
School Councils	
Parents	
Students	
Teachers	

This tool kit can be downloaded free-of-charge at www.learning.gov.ab.ca. Click on **Kindergarten to Grade 12,** go to **Resources for Parents,** click on **The Learning Team** scroll down to **Also available.**

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Introduction

The principal plays a key role in establishing a positive school climate and ensuring all students, including students with special needs, receive the programming accommodations and supports they need to be successful learners.

Programming for students with special needs requires teamwork, and an effective team includes parents as well as school staff. To encourage and enhance meaningful parent involvement in their children's education, Alberta Learning has developed *The Learning Team: A handbook for parents of children with special needs.*

The development of this resource was a collaborative process. Individual parents, parent groups and educators across the province participated in an extensive field review that generated many questions, identified essential information and developed practical strategies.

The Learning Team includes:

- sample strategies parents can use to participate in their child's learning team
- suggestions for ways parents can enhance and enrich their child's learning at home
- practical information and suggestions for:
  - helping children make successful transitions
  - voicing parent concerns
  - staying informed.

Introduction – continued...

While The Learning Team offers strategies that parents can use to strengthen their role in their child's learning team, this *Principals' Toolkit* offers sample strategies that principals and other administrators can use to support and enhance parents' participation in their children's education. Most of these sample strategies would benefit all parents, not only parents of children with special needs.

The Top Ten list contains ideas for sharing *The Learning Team* with parents and staff. It is followed by sample strategies for welcoming families to your school, enhancing home-school communication, encouraging parent participation in the IPP process, and supporting parent–teacher relationships. The toolkit also includes a list of sample questions that parents may ask their school principals. All of these sample strategies and questions support and enhance the key messages in *The Learning Team*. Consider these ideas as your build strong and supportive learning teams for the students in your school.

The Learning Team is available for purchase from the Learning Resources Centre.
Order # 511891 / 122 pgs / $5.70 + GST
(Price subject to change)
Order online at
www.lrc.learning.gov.ab.ca/
To find a free PDF version of this resource, go to:
www.learning.gov.ab.ca/educationguide/spec-ed/partners/

Top Ten Ideas for Sharing *The Learning Team*

1. Introduce *The Learning Team* at a staff meeting at the beginning of the school year. Make copies of the resource available for all interested staff.

2. Include a description of *The Learning Team* in a school or classroom newsletter. [See Appendix A for a sample newsletter article.]

3. Reproduce or customize sections of *The Learning Team* to use as articles in your school newsletter.

   For example:
   - Support learning at home (pages 21-23).
   - Tips for selecting software for your child to use at home (pages 39-40).
   - Tips for talking with your children about their special learning needs (pages 44-50).

4. Place copies of *The Learning Team* in a parent resource corner of your school library. [See Appendix B for a list of other Alberta Learning resources for parents.]

5. Share *The Learning Team* with the School Council, Parent Advisory Committee or Local Advisory Council. Organize a workshop to introduce the resource. [Sample activities and a PowerPoint presentation for a one-hour workshop can be downloaded from the Alberta Learning Web site at:
   www.learning.gov.ab.ca/educationguide/spec-ed/partners/]

Ideas for Sharing – continued...

6 Make extra copies of *The Learning Team* available for teachers to share at parent-teacher conferences or IPP meetings.

7 Add information about *The Learning Team* to the school's Web site. Include a link for downloading the free PDF version of the handbook. [See Appendix C for a sample Web site notice.]

8 Use the sample questions in The Parent Notebook section for discussion at staff in-services.

9 Use information from *The Learning Team* to create a notice or a display for a school bulletin board.

10 Photocopy, download or customize specific pages from *The Learning Team* to give to parents when they have specific concerns about their child's education.

For example:
- Assessment (pages 4-6)
- Transition tips (pages 63-65)
- Resolving differences (pages 72-73).

Welcoming Families to Your School

Sample Strategies:

- Prepare welcome packages for new parents. The packages could include school brochures, handbooks, calendar of events, maps, recent newsletters, *Curriculum Handbooks for Parents*, school agenda books, and school council information.
- Give new parents a guided tour of the school, highlighting the classrooms and areas where their children will spend time.
- Ensure that parents know where your office is located and when you are available for consultations.
- Introduce parents to staff who will be part of their child's learning team.
- If community services such as speech and occupational therapy are part of the child's learning team, let parents know who will provide these services, how and when.
- Let parents know different ways they can participate in the school community such as:
  - volunteering during school time or at home
  - sharing information about special interests, unique experiences, travel or careers
  - becoming a mentor to an individual student facilitating students' work experience or job-shadowing opportunities at their place of work.

Welcoming Families -- continued...

- Inform parents of community agencies and groups that provide different types of support and information. (See *The Learning Team* Appendix E, page 118.)

- Telephone parents after one month to ask for general feedback on their child's new placement.

- Host parent workshops throughout the school year. Topics could include strengthening literacy, decision-making, self-advocacy, study or friendship skills. Survey parents via the first newsletter to determine areas of interest and need. (See *The Learning Team*, Chapter 4, page 51.)

- Have a welcome package prepared for new students. It could include information such as a map of the school, names of the staff and positions, an inscribed pencil or a 'Welcome to our School Certificate' signed by you and the assistant principal.

- Recruit a buddy for new students on the day they arrive. This buddy can show the student around the school, introduce him or her to other students, answer questions and help the student feel accepted and welcomed.

Welcoming Families – continued...

- Use 'Comment Catchers' when parents or other members of the public are visiting the school. Attach a sheet of chart paper near the front entry. Place colored felt pens nearby for visitors to write comments about the school. Students love reading these!

What's great about Juniper School?

- Delegate time at staff meetings to inform staff of new students and their special needs.
- Visit new students in their classrooms shortly after arrival. Such personal contact helps the student to feel valued in the new learning community.
- Have a 'Welcome New Students' section in each newsletter. Write brief comments about each student.
- Make the front entry of the school inviting and student-focused by displaying student work, staff photos and names, and student art.
- Have a prominent notice board to advertise upcoming events and to recognize student and staff accomplishments and volunteer contributions.

Enhancing Home-school Communication

Sample Strategies:

- Include a parent feedback opportunity in your newsletter, such as a checklist of potential topics for parent workshops or presentations. Publish the results in a subsequent newsletter.
- Give ample notice of the dates and times for parent–teacher and Individualized Program Plan (IPP) meetings.
- Use the school newsletter to share ideas on how parents can prepare for and contribute to the meetings.
- Develop a corner in the school library where parents can access books, periodicals, videos or audio tapes. Include materials on such topics as curriculum changes, study skills, parenting and friendship skills.
- Use a strategy to provide consistent communication between home and school such as 'Friday Envelopes'. Each student has a personal envelope monogrammed with the school name, logo and address, plus blank spaces for the student's name and grade. All important announcements, newsletters, student work and assessed items are sent home on Friday. Parents ensure that the envelope is returned for Monday.

Communication — continued...

- Invite new parents to the next School Council meeting. Introduce them to the group and include them in the discussions.
- Have a school-wide 'Thank-you Mail-Out' prior to Thanksgiving Day. Students write letters of thanks to their parents for the opportunities, events and things that parents have provided, created or made possible.
- Video tape assemblies and special events for parents and grandparents who are unable to attend. Students can check out the videos through the school office or library.
- Use the free 'What's Happening' section of local newspapers and community newsletters to advertise important school events.
- Determine which language groups are represented in the school. Provide translation and other support services when needed. Be aware of cultural differences and find appropriate ways to communicate.
- Use the school and district Web sites to communicate important information to parents.
- Work with community partners to sponsor special events such as health fairs, technology nights or other learning opportunities to inform parents and families of community resources and services. Keep the events family-focused by providing activities for both students and parents.

Encouraging Parent Participation in the IPP Process

Sample Strategies:

- Ensure that parents understand the IPP process by using the school newsletter to share information and tips for participating. (See *The Learning Team*, Chapter 3, pages 30 – 37.)
- Organize a workshop for parents on IPP development.
- Provide opportunities for parents to provide critical information about their children such as personality traits, strengths and needs, and family, educational and medical history.
- Encourage teachers to share ideas with parents about how they can support IPP goals and objectives at home.
- Give parents ample notice of IPP review meetings, and send home tips for effective IPP meetings. (See *The Learning Team*, Chapter 3, page 35, Appendix C, page 114 – 115.)
- Encourage parents to attend the end of the year IPP review meeting. If this is a transition year, their input and support is critical.

Supporting Parent-Teacher Relationships

Sample Strategies:

- Provide professional development opportunities for teachers for enhancing communication with parents through such strategies as student-led conferences, three-way reporting or Celebrations of Learning evenings.
- Encourage teachers to develop family-friendly homework assignments and projects, such as home reading programs and math packs.
- Make time and resources available for creating classroom and school newsletters. The newsletters could include a calendar of events, learning experiences, test dates, units of study, class accomplishments, student work, Web sites for students and parents, or acknowledgement of parent support and assistance. Review class newsletters as a way of gaining insight into current learning opportunities in the school.
- Designate a short section of each staff meeting to enhancing positive parent-teacher relationships. Have teachers share ideas about what's working, such as experiences with volunteers, special events or communication strategies.
- Encourage teachers to use sample questions from Parent Notebook sections of *The Learning Team* in conferences and IPP meetings.

Supporting Relationships – continued...

- Work with school staff to organize parent workshops on topics such as:
  - implementation of a new curriculum
  - ways to support learning at home
  - strategies to strengthen literacy and numeracy skills
  - study skills.

- Encourage immediate contact between parents and teachers when concerns arise.

Tough Questions Parents Ask

Parents of children with special needs may have many questions about their child's school programming. Consider the sample questions in the following list and think about how you would answer these concerns and inquiries at your school.

Assessment

What is involved in an assessment?

How long will it take to have the assessment done and who will do it?

How stressful is an assessment for my child?

How accurate are the results?

Can the results work against my child or have a negative impact on his or her permanent record?

Will I get a copy of the results and recommendations? Will I get an opportunity to discuss these results?

How will the results of the assessment be shared with my child?

How often do assessments need to be done?

Who gets access to this information and what will they do with it?

Tough Questions– continued...

Programming

What is meant by special programming?

Who is ultimately responsible to ensure that my child gets the school program he or she needs?

Does the fact my child has special needs mean that money is set aside just for her or him? How will the money be spent?

What does coding mean and how is the coding decision made?

How is the decision on the type of programming made?

Do I have input? Who makes the final decision?

What will be done differently in the new programming that will make a difference for my child?

How will continuity be maintained from year to year?

What can you tell me about the teachers and the other students in my child's classroom?

What will the other students in the class be told about my child's special needs?

Will there be one-on-one support for my child? If so, will this time be spent with a teacher, a teacher's assistant or a volunteer?

What experience does the school staff have working with children like mine?

How will my child's social and emotional development needs be met in the classroom?

My child takes medication during the day. What is your procedure for administering medication?

Can I visit the classroom to observe how my child is doing?

How will we know if the programming is effective?

Will my child be tested differently or be held to the same standards as the other students?

Will my child have to write provincial achievement tests and exams?

Tough Questions– continued...

Individual Program Plans (IPP)

What is an IPP?

Who develops the IPP?

Should an IPP be different every school year? Can it be changed at any time during the school year?

What does my signature mean on this document?

Do I attend all IPP planning meetings about my child? If not, are the minutes of those meetings shared with me?

My child usually attends parent teacher interviews. Should that continue?

I noticed a transition section on the IPP, but my child has just begun new programming. Why is transition considered an issue?

Supporting my child's success

What can I do at home to help ensure that my child's school programming is successful?

If the support you offer doesn't work, will the school pay for a tutor or a private school?

What happens if I am dissatisfied with the progress or happiness of my child?

What happens if we don't agree on what the programming should be or the length of time the special programming is offered?

Planning for the future

Is my child responsible for informing teachers about his or her special needs and accommodations?

What does the future hold for my child—will he or she always be in a special class? Does this mean he or she can't go on to a college or university?

Appendix A:

Sample article for school or classroom newsletter

New resource for parents of children with special needs

If you have a child with special needs, you know that it takes a team effort to make sure he or she has the best opportunities to learn and grow. To help you work collaboratively in supporting your child, a new resource has been developed by Alberta Learning.

The Learning Team: a Handbook for Parents of Children with Special Needs has information and strategies you can use to work with your child's school and actively participate in your child's education. The handbook describes services and activities for meeting children's diverse learning needs at school, and suggests ways you can enrich your child's learning at home. As you read through the handbook, Parent Notebook pages provide a place to record your ideas, as well as sample questions to discuss with your child and his or her teachers. The handbook also contains information and strategies for helping children make successful transitions, for voicing concerns you may have, and for staying informed.

This resource is available free of charge on the Alberta Learning Web site:
www.learning.gov.ab.ca/educationguide/spec-ed/partners/.

To purchase a print copy from the Learning Resources Centre, visit www.lrc.learning.gov.ab.ca or call (780) 427-2767.

Appendix B:

Alberta Learning resources for parents

- *A Handbook for Aboriginal Parents of Children with Special Needs* (2000)
  Order #415704 / $4.60* handbook / 88 pgs.
  This resource was developed by Alberta Learning in collaboration with the Siksika Board of Education. This handbook provides Aboriginal parents with information regarding the education of their child with special needs. It also includes tips to enhance communication between home and school. The accompanying video, *Our Treasured Children*, highlights intergenerational stories from members of the Aboriginal community.
- *The Parent Advantage: Helping Children Become more Successful Learners at Home and School, Grades 19* (1998)
  Order #361501 / $6.80* / 68 pgs.
  This resource was developed jointly by Alberta Learning and the Learning Disabilities Association of Alberta. It was written by two experienced writer-teachers and includes strategies parents can use to help their child improve organizational, reading, writing, spelling, math, test taking and project skills.
- *The Journey: A Handbook for Parents of Children who are Gifted* (2003)
  Available November 2003
  Alberta Learning collaborated with the Alberta Associations for Bright Children in the development of this handbook of strategies for meeting the needs of children who are gifted.
- *Curriculum Handbooks for Parents* (updated annually)
  Can be downloaded at:
  www.learning.gov.ab.ca/parents/handbooks/.

(*prices subject to change)

Appendix C:

Sample notice for school Web site

Resource for parents of children with special needs

Do you have a child with special needs? Are you looking for ideas on how to be more involved in his or her education? *The Learning Team: a handbook for parents of children with special needs* has information and strategies you can use to work collaboratively with schools and support your child's learning.

Free PDF version at:
www.learning.gov.ab.ca/educationguide/spec-ed/partner/.

Resources for more information

Alberta Education. *Individualized Program Plans.* Book 3 of the *Programming for Students with Special Needs* series. Edmonton, AB: Alberta Education, 1995.

Alberta Learning. *Standards for Special Education.* Edmonton, AB: Alberta Learning, 2003

Alberta Teachers' Association. *Partners in Learning.* Edmonton, AB: Alberta Teachers' Association, 1996.

Barclay, K and E. Boone. *The Parent Difference.* Arlington Heights, IL: Skylight Training and Publishing Co. Inc., 1996.

Boult, Betty. *176 Ways to Involve Parents.* Arlington Heights, IL: Skylight Training and Publishing Co. Inc., 1999.

Canter, Lee. *Parents on Your Side: Administrator's Guide.* Santa Monica, CA: Lee Canter and Associates, 1991.

National Parent Teacher Association. "Standards for Parent Involvement in Schools." *Canadian Association of Principals*, Vol. 7:3, Winter (1998), pp. 34–39.

Schurr, Sandra. "Fine Tune Your Parent Power." *Schools in the Middle.* Vol. 2 #2, Winter (1992), pp. 4–9.

Feedback

The Principals' Toolkit to support
The Learning Team: A Handbook
for Parents of Children with Special Needs

We hope this resource is helpful for introducing *The Learning Team* to staff and parents at your school. Please indicate your agreement with the following statements about this resource.

Please return this page to:
Alberta Learning
Learning and Teaching
Resources Branch
8th Floor
44 Capital Boulevard
10044 – 108 Street
Edmonton, AB T5J 5E6
Fax: 780–422–0576

1. This resource contains practical ideas that I can use for promoting and supporting meaningful parent involvement in my school.

O strongly agree O agree O disagree O strongly disagree

COMMENTS

_____

_____

_____

2. This resource is well-organized and easy to read and use.

O strongly agree O agree O disagree O strongly disagree

COMMENTS

_____

_____

_____

3. The information in this resource enhanced my understanding of how I can support meaningful parental involvement in my school.

O strongly agree O agree O disagree O strongly disagree

COMMENTS

_____

_____

_____

4. We welcome your comments and suggestions for future Alberta Learning resources.

COMMENTS

_____

_____

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